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ABSTRACT

One of a series of instructional booklets designed to introduce adult education program planners to the basic concepts integral to and alternative strategies for conducting needs assessments, this instructional booklet serves as an introduction to the needs assessment process in general as well as to the remaining booklets in the series. Covered in the booklet are the following topics: stimulus for the instructional series, definitions for the instructional series, purpose of instructional series, target audience for the instructional series, content of the instructional series, use of the instructional series, and benefits of the instructional series. (MN)

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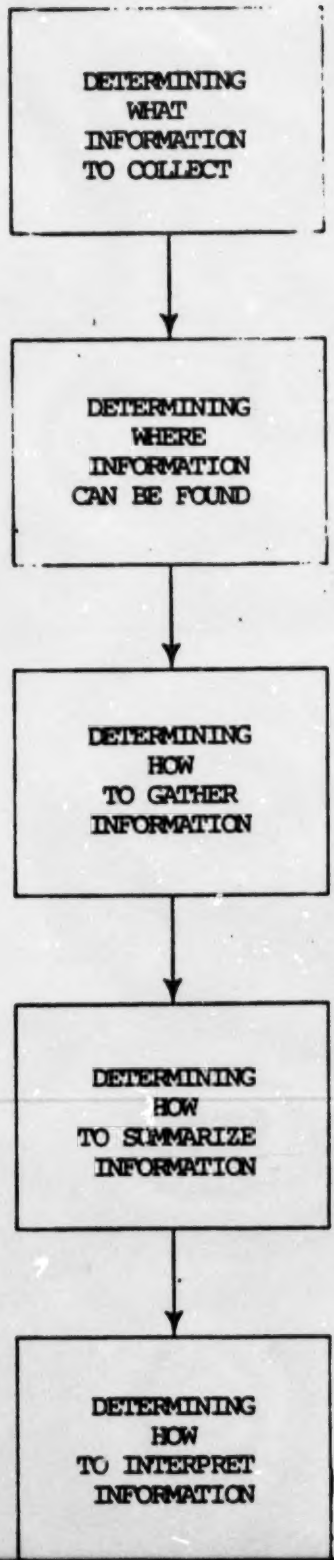
AN INTRODUCTION TO NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Special Community Service
and Continuing Education
Project.

Final Report.


DETERMINING WHAT INFORMATION TO COLLECT
DETERMINING WHERE INFORMATION CAN BE FOUND
DETERMINING HOW TO GATHER INFORMATION
DETERMINING HOW TO SUMMARIZE INFORMATION
DETERMINING HOW TO INTERPRET INFORMATION

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AN INTRODUCTION

TO

NEEDS ASSESSMENT

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SERIES PREFACE

This instructional booklet is one of a series prepared by the Special Community Service and Continuing Education staff at Texas A&M University. Its purpose is to introduce a diverse body of adult education program planners to basic concepts integral to and alternative strategies appropriate for conducting needs assessments. A broad base of research and information relevant to practice has been tapped in the development of the series.

This series is not in its final form but is rather "in development" as prepared for one-on-one testing in conjunction with a collection of adult education practitioners. Refinements are to be made subsequent to one-on-one, small group and field testing.

Recognition is given to those agencies and individuals who have contributed to the development of this series:

U.S. Office of Education, Department of Health, Education and Welfare, for providing funding;

Participants in the pilot test activities for generating case study applications: Mr. David R. Chagoya, Mr. Robert Felder, Ms. Alice Franzke, Mr. Jon Johnson, Sr. Maria J. Leavy, Mr. Jose D. Leza, Lt. Col. James V. Mahoney, Jr., Mr. G. M. Milburn, Jr., Capt. William J. Schrank, Ms. Lois Soefje and Mr. Charles Weichert.

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AN INTRODUCTION TO NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Stimulus for Instructional Series

The field of adult education has come, over time, to flourish in what many think of as most unlikely places. Yet, throughout this diverse evolution of the field, the assessment of need has held a long and honored position as an integral part of the program planning process and as a critical responsibility for every programmer. It has been one of the field's most pervasive and enduring philosophic postures.

It has been generally recognized that program planners, regardless of the settings within which they function, are engaged in two major and interrelated activities of the planning process: (1) diagnosing or assessing--needs assessment; and (2) remediating or developing—program development. Further, it has been held that program development derives its justification from the prior assessment of needs. This position places the program planner in a pivotal social role: of discovering needs; of building programs; and of effecting sweeping changes within individuals, institutions and communities.

At present, the literature base relevant to needs assessment, both within and outside the field, are not judged adequate to guide the adult education practitioner in conducting a needs assessment for two fundamental reasons. First, those commonly known and available resources

within the field are limited both in number and utility. Practical guidelines for engagement in the needs assessment undertaking have not been adequately specified. Thus, a specific process model or strategy is not readily available to provide direction in determining what information to collect, where the information is to be found, how the information is to be gathered, how the information is to be processed and how the information is to be interpreted. Without such guidance, a valid and reliable basis for programming cannot be assured. Second, a number of sources outside the field exist which address the needs assessment process. Such sources, typically incorporate a level of specificity which do provide adequate guidance for a practitioner in conducting a needs assessment. However, they are institution- or context-specific and; therefore, are built upon some assumptions which are inappropriate given the diversified contexts, focuses and institutional settings within which adult education programming takes place. As a consequence, though they offer concrete and specific guidelines for conducting a needs assessment from a particular institutional perspective, they are inadequate because their guidelines are not transferrable to adult eduction settings.

A serious responsibility exists within the field to address this needs assessment void, given its centrality and its significance to the entire program planning process and ultimately to the quality of life of adults within our nation.

Consequently, in response to this challenge, the principal author of this series has applied herself over a several year period, both on a part-time and on a full-time basis, to the resolution of this

critical problem of the field. The outcome of these research efforts was the development of a needs assessment process model for use by adult education program planners in whatever institutional settings they find themselves. The next step in the resolution of this need or void within the field was to "translate" this general process model from its stylized and technical research mode into a set of hands-on training materials. This is currently being made possible through a grant from the Special Community Service and Continuing Education Program of the Department of Education. Through this grant, our project is commissioned to develop these materials, test them out with diverse adult education programming professionals in Texas, progressively refine them and ultimately disseminate these materials nationally.

Definitions for Instructional Series

It is important to discuss the central concepts which form the foundation for the entire instructional series; namely, need and needs assessment. We will describe the meaning which we are applying to these terms and introduce you to the manner in which they will be employed in the booklets. We will first discuss the term need, how it is commonly used and the restricted sense in which we will be using it. Then, we will discuss the term needs assessment, our definition of needs assessment and the specific limitations which such a definition automatically carries with it.

Need is a tricky term because it is used in so many different ways. People use it to describe present problems with which they are faced. "The young people in our community have a major need; their

unemployment rate is at 37%." People also use the term to describe a goal that they are trying to achieve. "We need equal opportunity employment in our community." To further complicate the situation, people speak of needs as organized actions to attain an end. "Our community needs low-cost day care centers to make it possible for young mothers to enter the job market."

If we are to proceed together in any discussion of the needs assessment process, it is imperative that we share a common perception of how the term need is being used. As we define the term, and as many planners are currently defining the term, need is not a problem, not a present degraded situation; need is not an end, not a future goal to be achieved; need is not a means, not a planned program to attain an end. Need is a discrepancy between where people are and where they want to be or where someone else thinks they are and where they ought to be. Need is the gap between a present condition and a desired future condition. Further, the issue of who says there is a need is a critical one and is fully addressed in one of the booklets.

If this definition of need is applied to an assessment process, then it follows that the needs assessment process is essentially a system for identifying both the present situation and the level of aspiration of select groups of people. Further, if, with this information, discrepancies are found to exist, needs have been identified.

Simply expressed, needs assessment is a tool for decision makers. It is a systematic process that provides the right information at the right time to the right decision maker.

Decision makers like yourselves have other tools at their disposal

for enhancing the quality of their decision-making. Two of these tools are especially important; namely, the creative intuition and the practical experience of the decision maker. There is no substitute, including needs assessment, for what intuition and experience bring to the decision-making process. What needs assessment can do is complement these resources. It cannot take their place.

The information system we will be talking about is a special kind of information system. It is a system developed to help us learn more about people and about their needs in order that we--as providers of services for people--can make an appropriate response, can help reduce or eliminate the needs that are found to exist. Needs assessment is not the process of responding to needs but rather is the process of identifying and analyzing needs in such a way that we can decide if any response or what type of response is appropriate on our part. Thus needs assessment is the prelude to and the foundation for the program development or building process.

A caution is in order. This series, which describes the needs assessment process, does not lead one into an "educational" needs assessment such as is frequently undertaken by education practitioners in our traditionally youth oriented institutions. They would be looking at needs such as the reading level or the knowledge of history of their student body. This series represents, on the contrary, a needs assessment not limited to assessing purely educational needs, or discrepancies, but one which is focused rather on the very broad domains of human enterprise, such as the quality of interpersonal relationships, or the quality of civic responsibility within the community. One

could say that we are looking at "human" needs rather than "educational" needs: This position is based on the premise that many problem situations exist which do not, on the exterior, have the "trappings" of an educational problem; but which do have a dimension that can be appropriately addressed, at least in part, by educational programs or services. Conversely, those problems which do have the "trappings" of educational need states may likewise be met, and at times, in a more substantive manner by programs or services that are not strictly educational.

One other caution is important in our discussion. There are two distinct levels within which an assessment of needs is appropriate. First, there is the instructional level in which a specific educational diagnosis is made of persons engaged in or about to engage in an educational program. Needs assessment at this level is primarily a tool for and a responsibility of the instructor. It is employed to identify educational needs, and it serves as a basis for determining what is to transpire in the teaching-learning environment. Second, there is the programming level in which a general diagnosis is made of select groups of persons. Needs assessment at this level is primarily a tool for and a responsibility of the program developer or administrator. It is employed to identify a potentially broad array of human needs, and it serves as a basis for determining whether or not an educational program ought to be designed as a partial or complete response to that need. It is the second level of needs assessment that is of interest to us in this series of instructional booklets; namely, needs assessment for program planners.

Purpose of Instructional Series

Two fundamental purposes are seen for these instructional booklets. First, one purpose is to assist professionals engaged in building educational programs for adults, in conducting quality needs assessments. Obviously, needs are out there, and it is essential that persons in positions of leadership and responsibility have the capability of extracting these needs from the real world in a valid, reliable and useful manner. By doing so, programmatic decision-making will be informed not only by intuition and experience but also by information that can be trusted. Second, another equally important purpose is envisioned for these instructional booklets; namely, to assist program developers in becoming comfortable with the idea of needs assessment. Needs assessment has become a buzz word of the seventies. As such, a mystique has begun to surround the entire process which tends to place all who approach it in a posture of paralyzed awe rather than in a posture of dynamic interaction. We want you to reach that level of comfort which will permit you to call upon the needs assessment process in a flexible manner and at those times when you judge it can best serve your purposes.

Needs assessments that will result from the application of the concepts and processes put forward in these booklets will be as varied in form and substance as the field itself. This is both true and commendable. It is our hope that these materials are so designed as to permit—no, insure—that variability. Indeed, a needs assessment is, in some respects, much like tailor-made clothing. It will be good only if it fits the wearer, and in the needs assessment enterprises

of adult education, "one size does not fit all". You can make your needs assessment comprehensive or focused, formal or informal, lengthy or abbreviated, costly or inexpensive. There are all sizes, shapes and descriptions for there is no one correct needs assessment. The correct one is one that builds for you a valid reliable information base from which program development can proceed. It is only good or correct if it does what you want it to do!

Target Audience for Instructional Series

This instructional series is intended for use by people engaged in program planning for adults in such diverse settings as: cooperative extension service; colleges and universities; museums; hospitals; labor unions; religious institutions; public elementary and secondary schools; business and industry; correctional institutions; proprietary and trade institutions; community colleges; libraries; professional associations; military; and community service, health and welfare associations.

It is for professionals who assume quite dissimilar sounding roles within these institutions such as: Corporation Training Consultant; Base Training Officer; Dean of Public Service, Adult and Continuing Education; Director of Community Service; County Extension Agent; Staff Development Specialist for Adult Resource Centers; Director of Adult Services; Coordinator of Patient Education; Coordinator of Apprenticeship and Training; Union Research and Education Director; Director of Office of Adult Education; and Coordinator of Religious Education.

These individuals and these institutions are united by their focus: programming for adult learners.

Content of Instructional Series

There are five instructional booklets in this series in addition to the present one, An Introduction to Needs Assessment. These booklets each contain an introduction consisting of a slice-of-life analogy to the question raised within the booklet, a highlighting of the purpose of and rationale for the booklet and a discussion of its relationship to the rest of the program development process. The body of the booklet contains a discussion and definition of the central concepts with accompanying examples, and a review of the major processes to be undertaken in the resolution of the question addressed, also with illustrative examples. A summary section highlights the central points of instruction and helps establish a linkage with the following booklet.

The five booklets of the needs assessment process are:

Booklet 1: Determining What Information to Collect

Booklet 2: Determining Where Information Can be Found

Booklet 3: Determining How Information Can be Gathered

Booklet 4: Determining How to Summarize Information

Booklet 5: Determining How to Interpret Information

Use of Instructional Series

These instructional booklets have been presented to you in a logical sequence as a planning tool to assist you in making those decisions central to the needs assessment undertaking. It is anticipated that fortified by these resources, you will be able to take these ideas and implement them in a time sequence which may or may not parallel the logical sequence of the instructional booklets.

A booklet format was selected to provide you with the latitude to enter, exit and skip at any point you desire. This was done because we have assumed that there may be times when it is advisable and feasible to enter and exit the needs assessment process at various stages. For example, perhaps you have access to an array of data that has just been collected by a colleague in your department and you have been asked to "see what you can make of it". You could go directly to booklet number four of the process and begin there with the processing of the data, without consulting the previous booklets. Or, perhaps you have already identified the kind of information you want and you know you are committed to a phone survey as the method of data collection. However, you have yet to determine the best sources for your information. In this event, you should go to booklet number two and then directly to booklet number five. On the other hand, and perhaps most frequently, there will be occasions in which you will be starting at the very beginning and progressing through the end of the needs assessment process. We recommend that even though you think you can skip certain steps as you proceed to implement the process, you should research this carefully. It would be better for you to study the booklet in question before you dismiss the operation completely. If after checking the booklet you feel you can bypass it because of certain givens in your situations, you have at least avoided some potentially critical gap in your process.

Benefits of Instructional Series

A number of benefits are expected to result from the implementation of this project. First, a series of training materials will have

been developed with a high level of validity, reliability and utility for a diverse body of practitioners of adult education within our nation. Whereas many training materials are developed from the exclusive perspective of practice in the field, these training materials will have been developed as a result of the interaction of both theory and practice. A rich theoretical base provides the underpinnings for the model. Extensive practitioner interaction with the training materials derived from the needs assessment model provides the enrichment and the reality testing for the training materials. Second, a void in the professional development of adult education program planning practitioners will have been filled. The most readily accessible form which professional development could take is not through the development of graduate level programs of training or even through an elaborate program of in-service training workshops, but rather through the relatively inexpensive medium of the printed word. These training materials will thus have the potential for impacting broad segments of practitioner groups which might otherwise have been unaffected by developments in the area of needs assessment. Third, the active involvement of practitioners on both the grass roots level--policy implementers--and on the highest levels of institutional leadership--policy makers--would provide the ideal mix for the innovations in practice proposed within the needs assessment training materials to be fully adopted. This broad adoption within the field will constitute a major contribution to the professionalization of practice.

Thus, this project is expected to result in the preparation of valid, reliable and useful professional development training materials

which will be readily accessible to all adult education program planning practitioners and which will have a high probability of being broadly adopted by the field. The ultimate benefit will be the contribution of the project to the improvement of the quality of life for individuals, institutions and communities.

Summary

This series of booklets is designed to fill a void in the needs assessment literature aimed toward the adult education program planner. The needs assessment literature specifically written for assessors has been deficient in two respects: first, little or no direction on information identification, location, collection, processing and interpretation and; second, few allowances for the diversity of contexts and institutional settings in which assessors find themselves.

We will provide you with the planning tools for effectively conducting a needs assessment. We cannot give you answers for your needs assessment, but we can help you find the answers which are best for you. These materials are not an end in themselves--they are a means to an end. Each basic decision should be faced before you jump ahead and find yourself overwhelmed by the needs assessment process. Needs assessments are not simple. But they can be if certain definitive steps are taken. To be effective and provide you with a valid and reliable programming base, care must be taken at each step in the process. Good luck as you begin.